

Archives in New Zealand: a personal view

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It has often been lamented that librarians do not understand archivists. New Zealand Libraries invited Ray Grover, a librarian turned archives administrator, to write in personal vein about archives management in New Zealand. In the article which follows Mr Grover traces the recent development of National Archives and its relationship with local libraries and also discusses the essential function of a national archives repository.

My first experience with archives was at the end of my library school year in 1961 when I did my three weeks practical at National Archives before returning to the Turnbull to work in the Manuscript Room. My memory is that National Archives accommodation in the old Employers Association building at the bottom of the Terrace was even more cramped than the Turnbull's (which is saying something) and that it lacked entirely the fine public areas of the old Turnbull house. Indeed readers in the old National Archives had to squeeze themselves behind cast-off tables which were themselves squeezed into a reception/work/stack area — the sort of place where the lights and the heaters are never dimmed. The only library accommodation which might have equalled it was the three old houses used by the National Library Service in Aitken Street but even they had something approaching a reasonable window area.

In 1961, there was a vast quantity of archives held outside the custody of National Archives and on a couple of occasions I accompanied an appraisal archivist to a filthy, damp, rat-ridden cellar where irreplaceable material was 'stored'. Later, in the early 1960s, when I was writing a novel, I needed information which could be obtained only from an official source. This time I went with a departmental officer, not an archivist, to another cellar where some highly confidential records were kept. Although it was dry, the cellar had no door between it and the street. Nearly twenty years after that, not long after I came to work at National Archives, one of our alert archivists came across similar official materials left in a car park. Transfer to National Archives was speedy.

Archives administration

In 1961 National Archives had a staff of about eight and the Turnbull about 24. Heading National Archives was the Chief Archivist who was charged by the Archives Act 1957 'with the

custody, care, control, and administration of all public archives deposited in the National Archives and the performance of any other duties prescribed by this Act.' Among the 'other duties' the Chief Archivist and his seven helpers were supposed to perform were the selection of the public archives which were to be deposited, the inspection of those public records and archives not yet deposited, authorising the destruction of public archives not worth preserving, and providing public access to the archives in National Archives — many of them subject to varying restrictions. A public archive is defined in the Act as a public record which has ceased to be of current use in a government office. Public records are defined as all records of any kind made or received by any government office in the conduct of its affairs. Even in the late 1950s, the public service was not small and neither was the number of records it generated.

The catalyst for the 1957 legislation had been the fire which, in 1952, burnt the significant archives of the Departments of Agriculture, Lands, Marine and Works. They had been stored in sub-standard accommodation in the Hope Gibbons building in Wellington. Only a few charred remnants survived. It is worth noting that this was neither the first nor the last loss by fire in New Zealand of archives of high research value. Despite past losses, however, there was, in 1961, an enormous backlog of archives to be identified, selected, transferred, arranged and described, and made available to users. This was in addition to archives which were currently coming up for transfer from the originating departments to National Archives. It is, unfortunately, typical of archives management in this country that eight staff were supposed to deal with all the demands mentioned. Only one of the eight had received professional archives training, though Michael Standish, the Chief Archivist, more than compensated for his lack of formal training by some years of practical experience and his keen sensitivity towards archives values, preservation and use. Despite these qualities, however, he was not granted the status of Chief Archivist until three years after the Act was passed. During these three years it was the Secretary for Internal Affairs who retained the title.

A matter of interest to librarians is that for about twenty years from the 1920s, archives were under the control

of the Parliamentary Librarian. It is not unfair to say that library interests were put before those of archives during this time whether they referred to staffing, accommodation or any other resource. Library control of archives in New Zealand has had a little, but not much, to commend it. Neither has library advice to administering authorities such as the State Services Commission done the cause of archives much good.

Accommodation

In the late 1960s and early 1970s I used to pay occasional visits to National Archives in its next location in the lower ground floors of Borthwick House on the Terrace. There a reading area was at last supplied, and given that there were windows in the staffed areas, Borthwick House was a great advance on its predecessor. Otherwise it was a hole. The reading area was open to all the noise of other National Archives activities and the windows were at the bottom of a concrete canyon in which the sun neither rose nor set. The stack area was still grossly insufficient.

In 1973 Turnbull and the User and Technical Services of the National Library moved to refurbished accommodation almost opposite Borthwick House. Apart from the still cramped stack areas for Turnbull and the non-existent stacks for User Services, the contrast in the standard of accommodation for the National Library and National Archives was glaring. The National Library staff areas, although they too could have been improved, were some way ahead of what was considered sufficient for archivists and the public areas of the Turnbull, although not as large as they should have been, at least made some gesture in design and materials towards recognition of the choice holdings of the Turnbull.

It was in the late 1960s that National Archives decided to give up a site which had been offered to it on Thorndon Quay and share accommodation in the National Library building. The Thorndon Quay site would not have been worth having anyway, being too divorced from the Government Centre, but with hindsight we now know that the decision to go into the National Library building delayed National Archives getting its necessary purpose-built building on a suitable site by at least twenty years. It was, however, a decision which was greatly to the advantage of the National Library as without a National Archives commitment to occupy the whole of the top floor and a fair slice of the one beneath, the National Library would have found it much harder than it did to justify the size of the building it will now have. It might also be noted that at no time did anybody dream of suggesting that a National Archives building should be

built with future expansion space to be occupied by the National Library in the meantime.

The detrimental effect of the National Library building on dealing with the accommodation needs of National Archives has continued into the 1980s. In 1977 National Archives made a third move (and it is no more simple to move archives stock than library stock), this time to the Air New Zealand building in Vivian Street, Wellington, where it still is. First, this building is very poorly located for a national archives repository, because by its nature a national archives is part of the administrative and political process and therefore needs to be located in the midst of where that process is carried on. Secondly, the fire ratings of walls, the temperature and humidity controls, and the floor loading levels of much of its areas in the Air New Zealand building are inadequate. And thirdly, it is sited in a part of the city which has awkward access for researchers. For the first time there is a sort of a display area but it is much too small and no effort at all was made to design it or other public areas in a style which would reflect the rich and unique holdings it is National Archives' responsibility to seek to preserve and make available. Neither was any attempt made to install sound insulation between the reading room and the reference work area. I have been informed that the reason for the low standards was because it was believed the accommodation would only be of a temporary nature prior to moving into the National Library building. (The National Library accommodation on the Terrace was also known to be temporary.) We are still in this building and we are not moving into the National Library.

Currently steps are being taken to attempt to rectify the accommodation situation in National Archives, but what a recounting of the situation reveals is that archives in New Zealand still have a way to go before they receive the recognition that libraries have achieved over the years.

ARANZ

An organisation which has worked hard to increase archives awareness is the Archives and Records Association of New Zealand. It was formed out of the Archives Committee of the NZLA late in 1976. Broadly speaking, it was formed because the needs and membership catchment area for archives differed from those for libraries even though there was — and still is — a fair amount of overlap. The parting from the NZLA was amicable on each side. The NZLA over the years had supplied a most sympathetic environment for the Archives Committee to develop into the independent organisation. Unlike the NZLA, ARANZ has a majority of members who do not earn

their living from the professional work the organisation supports. One of the difficulties a New Zealand archivist has to cope with is that fellow professionals with whom experience and ideas might be shared are few. At present there are eight known people in New Zealand who have had a postgraduate archives education — four of them work in National Archives.

The Smith Report

It was through the efforts of ARANZ that the Department of Internal Affairs financed the visit to New Zealand in 1977 of Dr Wilfred Smith, the Dominion Archivist of Canada. The Public Archives of Canada is one of the leading institutions of its kind in the world and Dr Smith's report, *Archives in New Zealand*,¹ is, in archives terms, the equivalent of the Munn-Barr report of 1934. It deals with the archives situation in New Zealand as a whole and not just with National Archives. Recommendations include raising the status of National Archives to National Library level, the clarification of the role of National Archives in public records management, the planning of a free standing, purpose-built National Archives building, the establishment of regional archives throughout the country, bringing local authority archives and records management up to a proper standard, and the importance of preserving and managing film, map, church, labour and business archives. The role of libraries in much of this was seen to be important. Librarians might also be interested in his final recommendation (28(iii)): 'That serious consideration should be given to the formation of a Department of Information and Culture, major components of which would be the National Library and the National Archives, and a major objective of which would be to co-ordinate and develop the information resources of the country.'²

But National Archives does not just have a cultural and informational role. As Dr Smith states:

Unlike most cultural agencies the National Archives is an integral part of the government as the repository of the information which is most vital for government administration as well as a historical record of national experience. Because of the responsibilities in regard to the management of all government records and its control over the destruction of public records the National Archives requires a status which ensures a degree of independence and protection from political or official influence.³

Function of National Archives

A national archives is directly involved in the administrative and political processes of a country. First, as the initial paragraph of the (unpublished)

State Services Commission/Department of Internal Affairs *Management Audit Report* (1979) states:

Archives provide the essential record of all past activities and embody tradition and experience built up over the years by successive governments. For the people of New Zealand the archives are the repository of the record of every act of state that has affected their liberties, their property, their rights and their status as citizens in a modern democratic state.

It is the prime duty, therefore, of National Archives to select and preserve those essential records as it is, in effect, the custodian of the ultimate accountability of a government to its citizens. It is this role which is the major difference between a national archives repository and libraries in the government system.

As a consequence of this role a national archives has a very close relationship with the bodies from which it secures its acquisitions. It does not go out and buy and neither does it select for subject purposes as libraries do. Rather, it seeks to select according to the criterion of 'permanent value', a phrase I have yet to find a close definition of. The determination of 'permanent value' is arrived at by taking into account a number of factors: what the creating body considers it will need to assist in future administration, consultation with current researchers who use the non-current records of that body, an awareness of the current research scene in the field generally, documentary evidence on the operations of the creating body, and what the archivists consider the essential information on citizens' rights, status, liberties and property. Clearly such selection from the huge mass of records created by modern politics and administration is a daunting task. Because of the large administration and accommodation costs involved it is unrealistic to think of acting on the principle of 'when in doubt, keep'. Indeed a national archives would find it difficult to justify to its paymaster that more than an overall 10 per cent of public records should be retained as public archives. The New Zealand experience dramatically illustrates that it has been very, very difficult to gain acceptance of resources for even 10 per cent retention. Which is not to say, however, that if we are sure a higher overall rate than 10 per cent is justified we should not fight to gain acceptance of this. Such a policy is likely to have success only if there is an informed public awareness of what a national archives is about.

It greatly helps the archives case with financing authorities if another aspect of national archives involvement in government is emphasised and that is current records management. Bodies which manage their current records

efficiently are also more likely to ensure that those records which have 'permanent value' will survive for future use. It is, therefore, a proper role of a national archives to involve itself in measures which will seek to ensure efficient and effective records management by central and local government bodies. One of the reasons why the Public Archives of Canada is a world leader in archives management is because responsibility for current records management control in the Federal administration has been delegated to it by the Treasury Board of Canada — their equivalent of the State Services Commission. The Public Archives of Canada is thus able to demonstrate annually the considerable financial savings its records management practices contribute to the cost of government. Here National Archives already plays a limited role in such savings by running records centres in Wellington and Auckland which provide good quality, low cost accommodation for semi-current records — some of which will never be preserved as archives.

Involvement in records management assists a national archives in gaining the trust and cooperation of the bodies which it draws on for nearly all its acquisitions. Unless there is this trust and cooperation by the administrative system of which a national archives forms a part, it will find it difficult to operate effectively. One aspect which is particularly important is adhering to access restrictions laid down by the creating bodies within the bounds of the Official Information Act. In parallel, the provisions of the Archives Act have to be adhered to by the political and administrative system and there is more chance of succeeding in this when trust and cooperation have been achieved.

Once the archives have been received by the institution, some of the major differences between a repository caring for archives and a repository caring for publications become apparent. Libraries catalogue and classify, archives arrange and describe. The library tends to treat the individual item; the archives repository tends to treat the collections of items — collections which have grown out of a particular activity. These collections are arranged and described according to principles rather than catalogued and classified according to rules. The first of these principles is the principle of provenance, i.e. arranging according to origins in an organic body or activity. This means that there is no classification according to subject matter. This highlights one of the major differences between the archive or record and the publication. A publication tends to be a creation in its own right whereas an archive or record is a product of a body's activities and reflects the processes by which it came into being. Archives are best made

intelligible through creating an awareness of these processes.

The other principle by which archives are organised is respect for their original order. By keeping archives in their original order, the sequence of actions, administrative processes and connections between activities within the bodies and between the bodies themselves will be revealed. The description of archives, therefore, has the purpose of making clear to the user the structure of the archives themselves plus the structures, activities and functions of the bodies which created them. Experience has shown that this is the only practicable way the contents of archives may be indicated.

Despite these basic differences in the manner of treatment of the materials in their care, I have over the years noted little difference in professional attitude between archivists and librarians who work in research libraries. In each there is sometimes a negative tendency to 'defend' materials against the needs of the user on the grounds that use wears the materials out, which has a grain of truth in it, and, on the positive side, a love for the intrinsic nature of those materials and a desire to preserve and protect them for generations pre-

sent and future. What both archivists and librarians need to recognise is that they have a responsibility not for the materials as such — which have no value without a relationship to a user — but rather a responsibility to balance the known needs of current users against the possible needs of future users. The prime responsibility must be towards users and not towards the materials nor, for that matter, towards our own feelings as jealous protectors.

There is, of course, a final point to be made about the fundamental difference between an archives repository and a library and that is that all the contents of an archives repository are irreplaceable. If the National Library goes up in smoke, only money will be needed to replace a very large proportion of its holdings. If National Archives burns — as did the Public Record Office of Ireland in 1922 — all is lost for ever.

References

1. Wilfred I. Smith, *Archives in New Zealand: A Report* (Wellington: Archives and Records Association of New Zealand, 1978).
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 34-35.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

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